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ABSTRACT

A study examined two high school English teachers' explorations of portfolio assessment and the effect of these explorations on their teaching and on students' understandings of their own learning and knowledge. The teachers (one with 28 years of experience, the other with 3 years teaching experience) taught at a public city school with an ethnically and economically diverse student population. The teachers selected their ninth-grade average-track classes for study. Four focus students in each class represented a range of talents and abilities. Data included field notes of classroom observations, transcripts of interviews with teachers and students, and the content of the students' portfolios. Results indicated that: (1) the veteran teacher worked to instill students with the discipline necessary to stay with the text rather than drift into personal connections with it, while the new teacher created a supportive learning community where students could share their responses to texts; (2) the veteran teacher emphasized polishing up finished products and completing academic tasks, while the new teacher integrated portfolio activities into ongoing classroom activities; and (3) the veteran teacher was disappointed from the beginning in the quality of the students' portfolio collections, while the new teacher was satisfied and excited about her portfolio experience yet in doubt that her efforts would have any school-wide impact. Findings suggest that enacting assessment reform is difficult and often discouraging, for educators are called to question long-held beliefs of the nature of teaching and learning. (RS)

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Examining the Role of Assessment Reform in Literature Teaching and Learning: A Study in Two Classrooms

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Running Head: ASSESSMENT REFORM IN LITERATURE TEACHING

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The Study

This study examines two high school English teachers' explorations of portfolio assessment and the effect of these explorations on their teaching and on students' understandings of their own learning and knowledge. The study took place within the context of a larger, multischool study that chronicles, over a three year period, the efforts of 13 middle and high school teachers to use portfolio assessment to monitor student and program progress in literature learning. The participating teachers are primary researchers, designing their own literature portfolio assessments and reporting on their experiences. Two of these teachers, both teaching at Central High (a public city school with an ethnically and economically diverse student population) agreed to work with me in a more in-depth study. One case-study teacher (William) had been teaching at the school 28 years; his instructional goals were heavily influenced by his background in New Criticism and his belief that students should heed Ciardi's advice and learn to read literature "for what it says, not for what you think it says." The other teacher (Leslie) has been teaching 2 years; she received her education from a university noted for its emphasis on reader-response; her

instructional goals were informed by her belief that literature learning involves making connections between the text and personal experience. The teachers each elected their ninth grade (average track) classes to study. Four focus students in each class represented a range of talents and abilities.

Theoretical Framework

At the heart of the English curriculum is literature: at the secondary level, literature dominates some 50%-78% of English class time (Applebee, 1990), while at the primary level, literature is becoming a more prominent feature of the curriculum, displacing somewhat the reliance on basal readers in the teaching of reading (Langer & Allington, 1992). Yet despite literature's growing prominence in the curriculum, the goals of literature instruction remain diffuse, with no clear agreement as to what we want students to know once they "comprehend" a text. Traditionally "knowing literature" has meant being familiar with literary terms, canonic texts, standard interpretations, and textual analysis--knowledge that could be evaluated by multiple-choice tests or short essays. Yet in the past 20 years a growing body of work from a variety of disciplines has led many scholars and educators to broaden our understanding of comprehension, arguing that knowing literature involves more than a static rendering; comprehension is described as "meaning-making," the process by which readers create a "poem" from the literary text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Only very recently have researchers begun to reconceptualize evaluation in a way that makes it compatible with this dynamic view of knowing (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). These reconceptualizations have taken such forms as structured observations, conferencing, error analyses, descriptive student profiles, and reflective portfolios. Johnston (1992) calls these assessments "constructive" since they inform teaching and learning and because by acknowledging the subjectivity in assessment, they embrace the constructivists' understanding that assessment (and all knowing) is an interpretive act, i.e., teachers "compose" their students through assessment.

Portfolios are quickly becoming one of the most popular of these new assessment methods with many states, schools, districts, and teachers designing and implementing their own versions of portfolio assessment. Yet underlying the current enthusiasm for portfolios lies a concern that this fervor will quickly wane and that portfolios will end up being "about change without difference" (Roemer, 1991, p. 447).

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

During the 1992-93 academic year I observed three literature units (at the beginning, middle, and end of the year) for a total of approximately 40 observations in each of the two classrooms. The observed units and chronology for both classrooms were: short stories, poetry, and Romeo and Juliet. During the observations I took fieldnotes and audiotaped classroom interactions, paying

particular attention to teachers' oral and written responses to student work. I interviewed the teachers before and after each unit (and had on-going discussions with them about their work) and interviewed focus students twice (at midyear and at year end). Student work and portfolios (along with any teacher comments or marks) were photocopied. The teachers also audiotaped their thoughts as they evaluated focus students' literature portfolios and as they assigned these students' quarter and final grades. The teachers and I discussed their portfolio plans and practices at bimonthly meetings with the other participants in the multischool study; these meetings and other informal discussions were audiotaped. The teachers also submitted a written report at the beginning of the year detailing their research agendas and a final report at the end of the year. These data were triangulated to seek confirmation of emerging patterns which were generated and refined by progressive analysis.

Results

What it Means to Teach and Know Literature

William: Fostering disciplined readings. Will worked to instill students with the "discipline" necessary to "stay with the text" rather than drift into personal connections with it. Thus, during the poetry unit Will forbade students to use the first person when writing their reaction papers: "Do not use 'I'--no 'I think,' no 'I feel' no 'I like'--the subject of your sentences should be something to do with the poem, not you." He

also focused students' attention on literary forms and terms, which he felt provided them with a necessary "framework." During one short story discussion Will reminded students that the information in the text surrounding the story was more important for them to know than the story itself: "This is the sort of thing that you should be learning about and talking about--is the static and dynamic character idea, that you'll remember long after you've forgotten this particular story."

Working to understand a text was not necessarily enjoyable or natural--several times Will asserted his belief that understanding literature was different from "liking" it: "I'm not interested in whether [students] like [the poems] or not. I don't want to hear whether they like them or not until they can read them." Common homework activities involved having students write brief plot summaries of texts and writing responses to the textbook's discussion questions. Class time was often spent sharing and critiquing students' work. While he believed this approach may be "old fashioned" and even "a little pedantic," he felt that "students are going to have to face a wide spectrum of instructors . . . in their educational careers, and I think they're always safe with a traditional background."

Teaching literature meant demanding that students reread texts, during which he would call their attention to individual words or have them paraphrase lines and sentences. Often Will would read passages from short stories or lines of poetry and

then stop, asking, "What does that mean?" Teaching also involved evaluating students' responses ("that's why they pay me sixty-some thousand dollars a year"). Learning was an individual act, almost an attitude. Will felt most students didn't learn because they were unwilling to give up their "do the minimum amount [of work] possible" attitudes.

Leslie: Supporting personal response. Being a new teacher, Leslie was still searching for an anchor, a clear sense of purpose for her literature instruction goals. As she said at midyear:

> I'm always torn by how much my ultimate goal for these kids is not that they're going to be fantastic literary critics . . . but that they are readers and writers. That they can do it well, and that they find some value in making that a part of their lives. And when I think about it that way, I want to scrap that stupid textbook altogether and say, "Let's start going to the library."

But even as her specific goals and focus shifted with each unit, the remaining constant underlying her instruction was her desire to create a supportive learning community where students would feel comfortable sharing their responses to texts. Thus, teaching literature meant "building an environment . . . that . . . gives permission to kids to be curious and to think, and to question, and to learn really." Teaching and learning grew out of the social interactions within this environment.

For Leslie, literature comprehension was a mark of one's relationship to a text--it meant being "engaged" in one's reading. Learning was a natural and enjoyable outgrowth of this involvement. Common activities in Leslie's class involved having students keep response journals, asking them to relate texts to their lives and other texts, and sharing and enriching their responses in class discussions or "read-arounds." Culminating activities involved students completing "final projects," such as writing their own short stories, poems, and plays and performing these projects for the class.

Teachers' and Students' Interpretations of Portfolios

William: Portfolios as evaluation. William's explorations of portfolios involved designing assignments that asked students to organize their literature work into a "best pieces" collections and having students participate in a few self-assessment activities (activities he borrowed from Leslie). The portfolios did not replace his other evaluation methods (i.e., essay exams, multiple-choice tests, and quizzes on literary terms and texts).

William's conception of portfolios as evaluation tools was clear in how he designed and implemented portfolios in his classroom, where there was an emphasis on (polishing up) the finished product and where portfolio feedback was contained in his gradebook in the form of summary grades or marks. Even students' self-assessments received grades or marks, and he

discussed their quality--students wrote "well" or their self-appraisals were "quite accurate." Portfolios were created at the end of units and were not a part of daily classroom activities.

Students used their self-assessments and collections not to reflect on their work, but as persuasive statements that could help them get a good (or poor) grade; their products were thus indications of having accomplished an "academic task" (Doyle, 1983). In creating the collection, they typed or neatly copied their homework (or did the homework for the first time). In their self-assessments they focused on gaining sympathy or displaying the proper (humble, submissive, contrite) attitude: e.g., "While looking over my portfolio I realize while that I may have thought I was in need of little improvement, I was wrong."

Students also understood portfolios to be for the benefit of the teacher, not themselves. When asked why Mr. Cooper would want students to rate themselves on various skills, Craig replied: "He wants to know how we think we are ourselves. . . so he knows what he's dealing with." Another focal student, Carol, replied that the self-assessments "help [Mr. Cooper] on knowing more or less what to teach us." In her midterm she provided William with a list: "I would also like to read Shakespeare if you can. . . . I would like to do that 100 word spelling test you told us about."

Leslie: Portfolios as instruction. In Leslie's exp'orations, portfolios acquired something of a protean quality,

changing their shape throughout the year as she worked to involve students in reflecting on their learning and their processes. Whereas Leslie's journey began with a focus on students' becoming more aware of their learning, it led to an examination of the effects of teachers' and students' own judgments (often in the form of grades) on learning.

Central to Leslie's portfolios were ongoing self-assessment activities which were integrated into classroom routines. Collections tended to be created at the end of a grading period: Students selected and compiled their most meaningful work and, along with their reflections, submitted that work for grades and feedback. In the second half of the year, Leslie designed self-assessment activities which asked students to negotiate their interim and semester grades. By the 4th quarter these portfolio activities replaced other means of evaluation in Leslie's classes (i.e., quizzes, essay exams, and the evaluation of students' journals).

Leslie's conception of portfolios as instructional tools was clear in how she designed and implemented them in her classroom, where there was no clear division between portfolio creation and ongoing classroom activities. Portfolio feedback was interactive and dialogic--Leslie "conversed" with students about their work as a fellow reader/writer ("Rita: I noticed some of the words you used that are so evocative: 'succulent,' 'splintery,' devouring.' . . ."") and about their behavior as students ("Rita:

When your work is done and on time, it is always of outstanding quality. What seems to be the problem in this last quarter is getting the work in on time. . . ."). In this sense, portfolios were opportunities to have instructive conversations with students about their work as readers/writers and about their behavior as students.

Students viewed the self-assessment activities as a way to become aware of their growth ("It showed me how I improved from the beginning of the year"). They spoke confidently of their learning ("I've improved a lot--in things I never was good at--writing essays--I didn't know how to get my ideas down or how the form was. But I could now do it very easily. . . .") and of their ability to improve their work ("If I don't do something right . . . then I could do it better for the next writing."). They spoke of their grade negotiations as "grading [themselves]" and as a way to "get to know [themselves] in an honest way."

Teachers in Transition

William's portfolio reflections. From the beginning, Will was disappointed in the quality of students' portfolio collections, calling them, at the end of the first semester, "junk." While he had hoped for students' work to demonstrate thoughtfulness and creativity, he reported that the collections "were essentially an assortment of exercises from the textbook and nothing more." He noted that while "some concern with superficial neatness was evident," the majority of these

freshmen did not take pride in their work, instead being content to "barely scrape by with the minimum." For example, for the creative selection students wrote "some dinky little half page, one-fourth page or something." Near the year's end, he remarked, "I'm not sure that I've accomplished much of anything. Except beating my head against the wall."

But there were shreds of hope. At year's end Will was especially excited by students' responses on the final exam (authored by Leslie), which asked students to reflect on themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers both in class and in other contexts (e.g., home, other classes). Not only were the papers "fluent," "coherent," and "interesting," but they were also "honest and thoughtful." In his final report he wrote:

> I sense[d] that in this final project there [was] a lessening of the adversarial relationship between students and teacher, and that . . . some students [were] now ready to take a responsibility for their own learning.

William thus ended the year resolving to increase the number of opportunities for students to assess their own progress.

Leslie's portfolio reflections. At midyear, Leslie was encouraged with the results of students' reading/writing portfolios ("The kids were pretty insightful about what they learned, and they had clearly shown me that they had thought about it. . . ."). However, on one level she was dissatisfied:

"My [grading] system is still the same, only it has another element [the portfolio grade]. . . . I would like to change my system."

By the end of the year, Leslie had changed it. Instead of focusing on grading individual assignments, Leslie made nonevaluative observations (in a logbook) and provided students with oral and written feedback (from herself and other students). Leslie was happy with this nonevaluative stance because she became more involved in thinking about students' work:

> When I got over the initial discomfort of not having this solid rock foundation of numbers and letters to just chart up in [my] gradebook, I felt like I was doing more thinking about the kids than I did before. Before, I could take a very detached stance, and I did often. I wouldn't think too much about the kid. . . . [unless] it was an "89" [a border grade] or something.

In addition, Leslie found a new source of validity for her grades--a source that did not depend on numbers and letters, but one that was a result of her relationship with her students:

> I didn't feel [my grading] was too subjective, and you know what really made me feel confident? The kids did the evaluation. And that's a completely different perspective, and I found more times than not, they knew where they were, and were pretty honest about making that clear to me. So I felt like if I was in agreement

with a kid, then I was in pretty good shape.

While Leslie ended the year satisfied and excited about her portfolio explorations, she was also profoundly discouraged. For one, she doubted her efforts would have any school-wide impact given teachers' isolation and the lack of departmental leadership. Furthermore, she wondered if perhaps her extraordinary efforts to create a learning community within the school were only enabling an institution (which she felt was often destructive to students' learning) to survive. In addition, she was increasingly frustrated by the overwhelming about of "tasks" continually piling up in front of her, tasks that prevented her from reflecting on her teaching ("Anything that's really important, I don't have time to do!").

Discussion

Enacting assessment reform is difficult and often discouraging, for one is called to question long-held beliefs about what knowledge is valuable and about the nature of teaching and learning. It is no wonder that many teachers (and schools, districts, and states) succumb to the temptation to enact reforms such that there is change without difference. Making a difference requires that teachers are provided with opportunities to reflect on their teaching and are supported--by their departments and administrators, by other teachers and researchers, by institutions (e.g., state education departments, universities) and by the public at large (e.g., parents,

students, politicians)--throughout the change process.

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